

COMBINATION OF LETTERS OF THE DIVINE NAME

Ongoing recitations of letters and divine names are well-known techniques for the attainment of paranormal states of consciousness; they are used alike by Christian,¹⁵¹ Muslim,¹⁵² Hindu,¹⁵³ and Japanese¹⁵⁴ mystics. Most, if not all, of these techniques seem to operate upon the consciousness of the mystic by enabling him to focus his attention upon a short phrase or sentence—"There is no God but Allah," "Jesus Christ," "*Namou Amida Boutso*"—or even a few letters, as in the Hindu *Aum*. This relatively simple device is comparable to fixing one's vision upon a point;¹⁵⁵ the mystic must escape the impact of external factors, and in this respect his activity is similar to that of someone undergoing sensory deprivation.

Ancient Jewish sources, primarily those of Heikhalot literature, present a technique closely parallel to those found in non-Jewish forms of mysticism.¹⁵⁶ These affinities become evident when one compares some of the details shared by the Jewish and non-Jewish techniques. In another type of Jewish technique, however, the psychological result is different, given the discrepancy between this technique and its parallels on one important issue—namely, the use by Jewish mystics of a complex and intricate system of letters to be pronounced or meditated upon. Instead of the simple formulas of non-Jewish techniques, the Jewish texts evince elaborate combinations of letters with hundreds of components. Moreover, as we shall see, according to Jewish practice the mystic had not only to pronounce them according to strict, fixed patterns but had also actively to construct these combinations as part of the mystical practice. The effect of combinatory techniques was the result both of the process of their utterance and of the hyperactivation of the mind required to produce the contents that were pronounced. These monotonous repetitions of well-known phrases or divine names thus achieved not a calmness or stillness of the mind but rather a high excitation of the mental processes, triggered by the unceasing need to combine letters, their vocalizations, and various bodily acts—movements of the head or hands or respiratory devices.¹⁵⁷ Although superficially similar to a variety of mystical techniques based upon language, the Kabbalistic practice possessed an idiosyncratic psychological mechanism, only rarely occurring in such techniques. I shall briefly discuss here some sources concerning the pronunciation or repetition of divine names—a practice paralleled in non-Jewish techniques; I shall then discuss the medieval use of combinations of letters, which differs significantly from the more ancient technique.

It is a striking fact that a detailed and systematic technique of letter

combination forming the divine name appears for the first time in a work of R. Eleazar of Worms and, under his influence, among Spanish Kabbalists. More than in the other examples of mystical techniques attested by Franco-German sources prior to their appearance in Spanish Kabbalah, in this case there are reliable indications that the repercussions of this technique in Spain were directly connected to the Ashkenazic culture.¹⁵⁸ Abraham Abulafia explicitly mentions R. Eleazar's works as books he had studied; thus, the transition can easily be proven.¹⁵⁹ The other two Kabbalists of the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries acquainted with combination techniques—R. Joseph ben Shalom Ashkenazi and R. David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid—were either Ashkenazic by origin (the former) or had visited Germany (the latter).¹⁶⁰ We can reasonably conclude, then, that the mystical techniques surveyed below passed from Germany to Spain. According to the historical evidence, this movement took place only from the middle of the thirteenth century, thereby excluding Provençal and most Catalan theosophical Kabbalah from its influence. Thus, in contrast to the Ashkenazic influence on the emergence of the Kabbalah in those centers with regard to theosophical issues, this mystical technique was cultivated in Spanish circles relatively late. The delay can be understood in terms of the topic's esoteric nature, a feature that seems to be corroborated by the fact that, even centuries after R. Eleazar of Worms had recorded some details of this technique, they remained in manuscript, as did the mystical handbooks of Abulafia and his disciples.¹⁶¹

azar's statement that neither the divine names nor their vocalizations ought to be written down, lest those "devoid of understanding" use them.¹⁶⁷ R. Eleazar's fears can easily be understood in light of the criticism of a more conservative figure such as Taku; significantly, both use the same phrase, *baserey da'at*, in order to describe those who make use of the divine names. R. Eleazar, however, confesses that¹⁶⁸ "some future things and spirits were revealed to us by means of the [divine?] attribures¹⁶⁹ through the pronunciations of the depths of the names¹⁷⁰ in order to know the spirit of the wisdoms."

$\frac{1}{\sqrt{2}} \begin{pmatrix} 1 & i \\ 0 & 0 \end{pmatrix}$

R. Eleazar explains the combinations of these letters only on the cosmological and theological levels, with no reference to their possible use as a mystical technique. However, the fact that not only letters but also vowels are included in this table points to a praxis of pronunciation. Against the background of the earlier evidence concerning R. Eleazar's revelation using divine names, and the fact that he perceived their vocalization as connected with the use of these names, we can infer that, notwithstanding his silence, the author conceived these combinations as a mystical practice. This assumption is corroborated by a description of the creation of a *golem* (the vivification of a humanlike form made out of clay) by R. Eleazar, in which he wrote that we must pronounce all the letters of the alphabet over every limb of the *golem*, combined with one of the letters of the Tetragrammaton and vocalized according to the six vowels mentioned above.¹⁷⁸ Thus, despite the author's silence, the table found in *Sefer ha-Shem* was meant to be pronounced as part of a magical praxis for the creation of a *golem* by a certain incantation of combinations of letters. According to Scholem, this technique can culminate in ecstasy.¹⁷⁹ This assumption seems to be corroborated by R. Eleazar's confession that he received a revelation by means of the divine names.

The table above was copied in its entirety by R. David ben Yehudah he-Hasid, who presumably learned it during his visit in Regensburg.¹⁸⁰ He, however, considered the thirty-six combinations and vocalizations to be paralleled by the thirty-six movements of the *lulav*, an issue I was unable to locate in Ashkenazic texts. R. David's contemporary, R. Joseph Ashkenazi, an important source for some of his Kabbalistic ideas, elaborated upon R. Eleazar's table in his *Commentary on Genesis Rabbah*¹⁸¹ and in an unidentified discussion of the creation of a *golem*.¹⁸² These two Kabbalists do not, strictly speaking, belong to the ecstatic Kabbalah; however, both of them were interested in combinatory techniques, as indicated in their works. R. Joseph quoted Abraham Abulafia's *Commentary on Sefer Yeẓirah* and, as we shall see in the next section, preserved an important text on ecstasy and visualization of the divine names;¹⁸³ R. David apparently received revelations of Elijah.¹⁸⁴ Although I cannot conclusively describe these Kabbalists as following the mystical technique of R. Eleazar, the supposition that they were more than mere repositories of the Ashkenazic master's views seems a reasonable one.

There is little room for doubt as to the use of R. Eleazar's technique of combination for mystical purposes by his older contemporary, R. Abraham Abulafia. In his mystical handbook, *'Or ha-Sekhel*, one finds a similar table, albeit in slightly changed form: instead of six basic vowels, Abulafia prefers only five; thus, his tables consist of twenty-five basic combinations of letters

and vowels.¹⁸⁵ As in R. Eleazar, Abulafia's table is no more than a sample for the recitation of the combinations of all twenty-two letters, combined with the four letters of the Tetragrammaton. According to this table, the pronunciation of the divine name involves many sublime matters, and whoever does not take care when performing it endangers himself. For this reason, asserts Abulafia, the ancient masters concealed it. But the time has now come to reveal it, since, as he says, the messianic eon has begun.¹⁸⁶ Abulafia's assessment is indeed interesting: he argues that he merely reveals a hidden technique that has been in existence for a long time. This assertion strengthens the earlier assumption that R. Eleazar's table was intended to serve mystical, and not only magical, purposes.

Abulafia was more than a Kabbalist who disclosed esoteric techniques; his *'Or ha-Sekhel* was an attempt to integrate this technique into a speculative system including a philosophy of language and a definition of the ultimate goal of the technique—the attainment of *unio mystica*.¹⁸⁷ Thus, he succeeded in imposing an elaborate mystical technique on a larger public, as convincingly indicated by the relatively large number of manuscripts of *'Or ha-Sekhel*.¹⁸⁸ In early sixteenth-century Jerusalem, R. Yehudah Albotini composed a mystical handbook, *Sullam ha-'Aliyah*, based upon Abulafia's techniques, including among other things the tables found in *'Or ha-Sekhel*.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, Abulafia's tables, accompanied by some of his explanations, were quoted in one of the classics of Kabbalistic literature, Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*.¹⁹⁰ Significantly, this Safedian Kabbalist begins his extensive discussion of pronunciation of the divine name with Abulafia's system,¹⁹¹ afterward mentioning that of R. Eleazar of Worms, copied from a secondary source.¹⁹² As we learn from the testimony of R. Mordecai Dato, a disciple of Cordovero, his master, influenced by Abulafia's works beyond their quotation, practiced Abulafian techniques and taught them to his students.¹⁹³ Furthermore, he regarded Abulafia's technique as a "Kabbalistic tradition transmitted orally, or the words of a *Maggid* [celestial messenger]." ¹⁹⁴ It is no wonder, then, that he considered Abulafia's type of Kabbalah as superior even to that of the *Zohar*.¹⁹⁵ Cordovero, however, not only contributed to the dissemination of Abulafia's tables, as he did with those of R. Eleazar; quoting Abulafia's explanations, he also propagated the view that the union of the human and divine minds was to be achieved through this technique,¹⁹⁶ which, as Abulafia put it, "draws down the supernal force in order to cause it to be united with you."¹⁹⁷ This Hermetical understanding of Abulafia's technique¹⁹⁸ had an important influence on the Hasidic perception of *devekut* as attained by causing divine spiritual force to descend upon the mystic.¹⁹⁹ Strangely, the old Ashkenazic mystical technique

had to travel throughout Spain and Italy, as well as Safed, before it eventually returned to Ashkenazic mysticism.

I have surveyed the history of one combinatory technique. A few others, connected with the recitation of the alphabet according to the permutations of letters given in *Sefer Yezirah*, were used both by R. Eleazar of Worms and by Abulafia.²⁰⁰ The latter presented several elaborate techniques in his other handbooks: *Sefer Hayye ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, *Sefer ha-Hesbek* and *Sefer 'Imrei Shefer*. This willingness to propose more than one technique as a suitable path for attaining a mystical experience is decisive proof that Abulafia transcended the magical perception shared by the mystics that there was one and only one way to attain the supreme experience. Although his various techniques shared some elements in common, such as the need for isolation, breathing exercises, bodily movements, and the wearing of clean garments, they differed in many basic details. Abulafia also cultivated the pronunciation of letters of the divine names inscribed variously in different kinds of circles, a technique having nothing to do with the table technique mentioned above. These circles consisted of permutations of some of the biblical and later divine names according to different combinatory techniques; the use of circles is also conspicuous in *Hayye ha-'Olam ha-Ba*, which was aptly designated *The Book of Circles*.²⁰¹ No wonder, then, that one of the most elaborate visions reported by Abulafia is that of a circle, a Kabbalistic mandala including both cosmic and psychological structures.²⁰² Interestingly, the vision of circles recurs in the works of other ecstatic Kabbalists, who used Abulafian or similar techniques of combinations of letters, such as R. Isaac of Acre, R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon, and R. Elnathan ben Moses Kalkis.²⁰³

In *'Or ha-Sekhel* Abulafia emphasizes, more than does R. Eleazar in his works, that his tables, as well as his circles, are methods for facilitating all possible combinations of the letters of the divine names. These letters are sometimes permuted without adding other letters; at other times—as in the table—the entire alphabet is used in order to pronounce the letters of divine names. Although the pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton was conceived as a transgression of both biblical and rabbinic interdictions, there was no attack on Abulafia's technique on this ground in the Kabbalistic material with which I am acquainted. Although it is a conspicuously anomian technique, the recitation of letters as described by Abulafia managed to escape the fierce criticism to which his prophetic and messianic activities were subjected.

We can summarize this short survey of one of Abulafia's techniques by stating that the incorporation of R. Eleazar's method of combination of letters into the Spanish Kabbalah fertilized it by allowing for the construction of a

more elaborate technical path intended to attain mystical goals such as revelations and union with supernal beings. This technique remained the patrimony of a few, albeit important, Kabbalists, contributing to the emergence of extreme types of mystical experiences.

- אבל הוא מזכיר שמות הקדושים או שמות המלאכים כדי להראות לו רצונו או לחוריעו דבר סתר, ואז רוח הקודש נגלה עליו והבשר . . . נפעמת . . . מעוז רוח הקדש.
166. 'Ozar Nehmad III (1860), p. 84:
חסרי דעת, המינים. לעשות עצמם נביאים, מרגילים עצמם בהזכרת שמות הקדושים ופעמים יכוונו בקריאתן והנשמה מתבהלת . . . כשסתלק ממנו כח השם שחזכיר, חוזר לכמות שהיה ברעת מבוהלת.
- See also Scholem, *Major Trends*, pp. 102–103.
167. *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* MS Oxford 1812, fol. 55b:
"ומן הרין לא היה לכתוב הכל ולא לנקבו בו פן ישחמשו חסרי הרעת."
On this treatise, see Joseph Dan, "The Ashkenazi Hasidic *Gates of Wisdom*," in *Hommage à Georges Vajda*, ed. G. Nahon and C. Tonati (Louvain, 1980), pp. 183–189; Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, pp. 44–57.
168. *Ibid*, fol. 55b:
"נגלה לנו קצת ענייני עתידות ורוחו', במדות על פי הזכרות עומקי השמות לידע רוח החכמות."
169. "מידות"; the significance is uncertain.
170. The phrase "עומקי השמות" is reminiscent of certain phrases occurring in Abraham Abulafia's works as referring to the highest Kabbalistic path. See Idel, "Maimonides and Kabbalah," nn. 83, 84, 93, 99, and Gikatilla's phrase, n. 105.
171. Compare also R. Eleazar's description of the transmission of the Tetragrammaton to a disciple, which seems to reflect not only an ancient practice but also an extant praxis. Cf. Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, pp. 74–76; Dan's assertion (p. 75) that the ceremony of transmission of the name has only theological, not magical, overtones must apparently be modified in the direction of more experiential implications of the knowledge gained by the reception of the name.
172. See Idel, "The World of Angels in Human Shape," pp. 1–15.
173. On this issue, see Idel, "The Concept of the Torah," p. 28.
174. See Idel, "The World of Angels in Human Shape," p. 13 n. 52, and Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Chap. I; there I deal as well with passages from R. Isaac ibn Latif and R. Moses of Burgos.
175. See, for example, 'Ozar 'Eden Ganuz, MS Oxford 1580, fol. 149b, where he mentions the "Chapters of Heikhalot," "The Book of Bahir," and "The Alphabet of R. 'Akiva."
176. MS München 43, fol. 219a. This is a short section from the larger *Sefer ha-Shem*, entitled 'Eser Havvayot, circulating in some manuscripts. This table was copied from this compendium by R. Yehudah Hayyat in his commentary on *Ma'arekhet ha-'Elohit*, fol. 197b, and subsequently in R. Moses Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*, fol. 97c-d. The latter knew of two versions of this table; on the second of these, see n. 192 below.
177. The vowels clearly occur in order to facilitate the pronunciation of the consonants; however, I assume that the mystical and magical feature of the vowels, known from ancient Hellenistic magic, may also have been known in Jewish circles. On vowel mysticism in Abulafia's circle, see also R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, "Kabbalistische Buchstabenmystik und der Traum," *Zeitschrift für Religions und Geistesgeschichte* 8 (1956): 164–169.
178. *Commentary on Sefer Yeẓirah* (Premizlany, 1883), fol. 15d.
151. Irénée Hausherr, "La Méthode d'oraison hesychaste," *Orientalia Christiana* 9 (1927): 68–69.
152. G. C. Anawati and L. Gardet, *Mystique musulmane: Aspects et tendances, expériences et techniques* (Paris, 1976), pp. 187–234.
153. See, for example, Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton, N.J., 1971), pp. 200ff., esp. pp. 216–219, where the similarities between the Sufic "dhikr" and parallel Hindu phenomena are noted.
154. D. T. Suzuki, *Essais sur le Bouddhisme Zen* (Paris, 1943), 2:141–151, and passim.
155. See, for example, Eliade, *Yoga*, pp. 47–52.
156. See Anawati and Gardet, *Mystique musulmane*, pp. 189–190.
157. For a detailed description of these components of Kabbalistic mystical techniques, see Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Chap. I.
158. On the influence of Ashkenazic theology on Spanish Kabbalah, see Joseph Dan, "The Vicissitudes of the Esotericism of the German Hasidim" (in Hebrew), in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem* (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 91–99. Dan, however, does not discuss the influence of R. Eleazar's mystical technique.
159. See, for example, "Ve-Zot li-Yihudah," in Jellinek, *Auswahl*, p. 25.
160. See Matt, *The Book of the Mirrors*, p. 1.
161. See the quotation from R. Eleazar's *Sefer ha-Hokhmah* in n. 167 below.
162. See Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, Chap. I.
163. See Sec. II above.
164. On this treatise, see Dan, *The Esoteric Theology*, pp. 143ff.
165. MS Cambridge, Add. 643, fol. 19a; MS Oxford 1574, fol. 34b; MS Vatican 431, fol. 39a;

On the penetration of this text into Renaissance literature and praxis, see M. Idel, "Hermeticism and Judaism," par. V.

See Matt, *The Book of the Mirrors*, p. 95; 'Or Zaru'a, MS British Library 771, fol. 92b. It was copied from the latter text by R. Moses Cordovero in *Pardes Rimmonim*, fol 98a. R. Menaḥem Recanati was also acquainted with this peculiar theory of thirty-six combinations of letters and vowels, although he did not copy the table; see his *Commentary on the Pentateuch*, fol. 49b. Nevertheless, the commentator on this text, R. Mordecai Jaffe, obviously perceived the original source of Recanati and gives the detailed combinations.

MS Sasson 290, pp. 198–200; this text will be printed and analyzed elsewhere. The identification is provisional, as this text is also close to R. David ben Yehudah he-Ḥasid's thought.

Idel, "Kabbalistic Material," p. 198.

¹Or *ha-Sekhel*, MS Vatican 233, fol. 97b, MS Fulda 4, fol. 32b:

See Idel, "Abraham Abulafia and *Unio Mystica*."

See Gershom Scholem, "Chapters from *Sefer Sullam ha-'Aliyah* of R. Yehudah Albotini" (in Hebrew), *Kiryat Sefer* 22 (1945): 168; David Blumenthal, *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1982), 2:65–66.

Cordero does not mention Abulafia's name because, at the time he composed *Pardes Rinnonim*, he mistook this for a work of Gikatilla, *Sha'ar ha-Nikkud*. However, in another, later work, he refers correctly to both author and book.

See M. Idel, "Some Remarks on R. Abraham Abulafia and R. Moses Cordovero" (in Hebrew), *Da'at* 15 (1985): 117–120.

"ודבריו דברי קבלה מפה אל פה או דברי מגיד"

Parides Rimmonim, fol 97a:

ibid, fol. 97b.: "ומושך כח העליון להדבקו בך"

For more on this development, see Idel, "Perceptions of Kabbalah" and Chap. VII below.

201. See Idel, "Egidio da Viterbo and R. Abraham Abulafia's Books" (in Hebrew), *Italia* 2, nos. 1-2 (1981): 48.

203. Cf. *ibid.*